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UNCLAS MADRID 000712

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [SP](#)

SUBJECT: SUBJECT: SPANISH ELECTIONS: MAJOR ETA ATTACK ON MADRID FOILED

REF: MADRID 679

[1](#)1. Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

[1](#)2. (U) The Guardia Civil arrested two ETA members in the pre-dawn of February 29 on a highway about a hundred miles east of Madrid. One of the ETA operatives was in a van carrying over 500 kg of explosives; the other was in a lookout car. They entered Spain from France via Huesca. Interior Minister Acebes reports that their target was Madrid. Police estimate that detonation of the explosives would have left a crater 35 meters in diameter and that anyone within 60 meters of the explosion would have been killed. It was the second largest Spanish police interception of explosives in the 35-year battle against ETA.

[1](#)3. (SBU) As reported reftel, Police contacts had indicated to us their concerns that ETA would attack during the election campaign (which officially began February 27). Police believe ETA seeks to demonstrate that it still is operational and wants to back up its self-declared "cease-fire" for Catalonia by striking elsewhere in Spain. Police remain on high alert to guard against other possible attacks prior to the March 14 general elections. The two arrested ETA members were reportedly on their first mission. This conforms with Spanish police analysis that ETA operational cell members are increasingly inexperienced and prone to error.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The February 29 arrests follow on the December 24 police pre-emption of another ETA bombing. In that instance, two ETA members placed backpacks with 25 kg of explosives each on a train going to Madrid from Irun (Basque region). The explosives were timed to explode once the train arrived at the station in Madrid. Police uncovered the bombs soon after they were placed. Some analysts note that the averted truck bomb and the averted bombing of the Madrid train station indicate that ETA, as it declines, may be moving into a phase of more indiscriminate attacks. In both occasions, ETA sought high profile periods, Christmas Eve or the national election campaign, for maximum publicity impact.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Popular Party leader Mariano Rajoy used the incident to demonstrate the success of the PP government's antiterrorism strategy, which has resulted in hundreds of arrests and the significant disruption of the ETA organization. The core of the GOS strategy is the need to go after the entire ETA infrastructure: financing, logistics, political support, and recruiting and not just the operational cells. Rajoy reiterated February 29 that defeating ETA would be his number one priority as President of the Government (as it has been for Aznar).

[1](#)6. (U) Interior Minister Acebes used the arrests to draw attention to the Socialists' pact with the pro-independence ERC party in Catalonia. Acebes said that ERC leader Carod-Rovira -- who met with ETA leaders in January -- must be "very satisfied" that Madrid was the intended target, not Catalonia. Socialist leader Rodriguez Zapatero, and various media, strongly criticized Acebes and the PP for politicizing the fight against ETA.

[1](#)7. (SBU) Comment: Although foiled in this case, ETA has demonstrated that despite the many arrests and pressures it has suffered, it is still operational (albeit at a much lower level than previously). Like a wounded animal, ETA appears determined to lash out -- and would like nothing better than to do so during the current election campaign.

MANZANARES